



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Death in Venice by Luchino Visconti

Joan Mellen

Film Quarterly, Vol. 25, No. 1. (Autumn, 1971), pp. 41-47.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197123%2925%3A1%3C41%3ADIV%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Reviews

DEATH IN VENICE

Director: Luchino Visconti. Script: Visconti and Nicola Badalucco, based on the novel by Thomas Mann. Photography: Pasquale de Santies.

Like the playwrights and novelists of earlier ages, film-makers are under no aesthetic obligation to respect their sources merely for the sources' sake; indeed, departure from the source is precisely part of the challenge of adaptation, and it is always necessary, of course, in the drastic compression through which a novel must pass to reach screen length. Sometimes, as in *Jules and Jim* or *Bicycle Thief*, the film seems incomparably more powerful than the novel—though we need not always ask that film-makers “improve” upon the original, since an honorable job of work may be pleasurable and useful enough. But in any case comparisons are inevitable, since the way in which the original (or at least penultimate) author framed and solved the problems of the work cannot help but be of interest as we examine how the adapter attempted to frame and solve them.

However, when a film-maker chooses to call his work by the title of the original, it is always part of the critic's task to compare the spirit and the letter of the adaptation with the original. Pinter and Losey calling their film *The Go-Between* is an assertion that they are capturing visually the psychological nuances of L. P. Hartley's novel by the same name. The degree of their success, however great or small, is to some extent a comment on the significance of the original as well as a measure of how well they have achieved a self-assigned aesthetic task. By calling his film *Death in Venice*, Visconti asks us to discover Thomas Mann's story within the texture of his film, as Kurosawa, with more humility, does not ask us to do when he gives his version of *Macbeth* the title *Throne of Blood*.

Gustav von Aschenbach, as created by Thomas Mann, stood as a moral authority

epitomizing the values and precedence of the bourgeoisie. He was world-renowned, awarded a title of nobility by a German prince. His books were honored, chosen as texts in the schools, because he scorned those who failed to survive in the bourgeois world, who lacked the “moral fiber,” the discipline not to ask the wrong questions. He was the spokesman of those who would avert their eyes from men too weak or too sensitive to survive in a puritanical, callous, and self-centered age.

In the hands of Luchino Visconti, Aschenbach is instead the “weak and silly fool” for whom Mann's Aschenbach showed little sympathy in his ironically titled novel *The Abject*. Where Mann's Aschenbach approached tragic dimensions as an artist larger than life whose fall presaged the fall of his epoch, Visconti's is a repressed, priggish gentleman whose infatuation with an exquisitely lovely adolescent boy reflects more ignominy than irony. Far from Mann's distinguished author, he is a whining, whimpering man in need of smelling salts.

The notion that Aschenbach was based upon the composer Gustav Mahler led Visconti to two disastrous choices in his adaptation. First, he makes Aschenbach himself a composer, condemning him to an artistic world of abstractions. Unnecessarily, he forfeits the advantage of a character whose words could provide an ironic commentary on his own behavior with his repressed impulses liberated only in the corrupting lagoons of Venice. As a composer, Aschenbach cannot have the social role as guardian of the morality of his class that Aschenbach the philosophical novelist could enjoy.

Secondly, Visconti overwhelms his *mise en scène* with the music of Mahler himself, his requiems here oddly out of place because Visconti has not created a character as heroic or as large as the movements of Mahler would demand—though the music of Mahler would have fitted Mann's paean to the spiritual fall of the bourgeoisie. It is out of place in a film about a middle-aged man's infatuation with a young boy, a man lacking all will and strength. From beginning to end Visconti's character is

incredible as the moral voice of the idle bourgeoisie which wallows passively in the luxury of the Grand Hotel des Bains during the period preceding the First World War.

In Visconti's latest "masterpiece" (it is said that he was outraged at not being awarded the Golden Palm at Cannes), we are treated to every danger inherent in the adaptation of the classics of fiction into film. Milieu is made an easy substitute for analysis, melodrama (Aschenbach's choking with Asiatic cholera in the last scene, black dye running down the sides of his face, is quite ridiculous) for a sustained metaphor which would illuminate the contradictions inherent in the character of a man who would live simultaneously as bourgeois and artist.

Visconti does magnificently with his evocation of the wealthy bourgeoisie on vacation at Venice. He surveys the lobby of the hotel, introducing us to the world in which Aschenbach holds a respected place. Aschenbach enters the lobby before dinner dressed in the manner of his class, replete with white gloves. Women in the most elaborate of costumes outnumber the men, foreshadowing the oncoming of the war—a point Visconti makes beautifully merely by a pan of the camera, without a word of the didactic dialogue too frequently the technique of historical exposition in *The Damned*. The hotel is adorned with enormous vases of gorgeous flowers, the women are all in pearls and feathers, and the loveliest image in the film may well be not the boy Tadzio, but his elegant, superior mother played by Silvana Mangano. She shakes hands with her plain daughters and idolizes her son. As she walks through the film, her words are inaudible, incomprehensible, and thoroughly perfect. She is the glory of her class, a living example of privilege, but inexpressibly beautiful with her poise, control, pearls, mauve satin, and lace.

But this depiction of the vacationers, with whom Aschenbach blends in so well, functions in the film more as painting than as cinema. The image is static. Self-satisfied, these people can be no more than they appear. After the

panoramic lobby scene, their presence becomes superfluous. They cannot provide the film with a sustained dramatic action.

Visconti makes his most serious mistake in opening the film with Aschenbach already on the steamer carrying him to Venice. In rimless spectacles and scarf up to his neck, symbolically shielding himself from contact with the world, Aschenbach is irritable and impatient. But we are unclear about why. Mann introduced *his* Aschenbach to us *in medias res*, within the context of the routines of a normal day, the better for us to contrast the Aschenbach who began each day by a cold shower with the Aschenbach who can murmur "I love you" outside a young boy's door. Visconti gives us too little information about the man who is about to sacrifice all his previous standards for one more moment in the presence of a beloved to whom he must never speak.

Thus Visconti's tale is fraught with melodrama, because psychology is reduced to the violently inexplicable. The people in Visconti's films, lacking meaningful personal histories, emit an air of unreality. A flashback to a collapsed Aschenbach after a concert informs us that he travels because a doctor prescribed a change of scene. This is indeed a far cry from Mann's Aschenbach who travelled because his unconscious, struggling to free itself from bourgeois restraints which governed his daily life, felt a demonic need to flee from the rigors of Munich, to renounce his commitment to a culture which defined itself by his words.

Visconti omits the first demon wanderer in Mann's story, the red-headed traveller with a knapsack on his back, whose image awakens in Aschenbach the irresistible urge to travel. He wastes Mann's second demonic metaphor of Aschenbach's unconscious, the young-old man who assaults Aschenbach on board the steamer with his carmined cheeks and yellow teeth. He is repulsive, but we do not yet connect him with a latent self-destructive wish playing in Aschenbach's unconscious, undermining his will to lead a morally righteous life. Visconti should have shown us Aschenbach as he was in Munich, instead of offering meager, rather un-

believable, flashbacks of an idyllic relationship with a beautiful wife mysteriously vanished. In his past Visconti's Aschenbach is shown capable of an exuberant joy, an abandon which Mann would have found inconsistent with a character so closely resembling his paternal forbears: "officers, judges, departmental functionaries—men who lived their strict, decent, sparing lives in the services of king and state." But only for Mann's solitary, self-denying artist does an obsessive sojourn in Venice become either credible or interesting.

Because Visconti's Aschenbach is never in the German bourgeois world in which he was master of himself, we do not believe in the character, despite Dirk Bogarde's valiant performance. Visconti has not allowed his Aschenbach a wide enough arena for self-expression, and the twitching of the mouth and sly smirks with which Bogarde conveys Aschenbach's repressed lusts emerging are too frequently ludicrous, embarrassing even a well-disposed opening-day audience.

To compensate for such frail characterization, Visconti relies heavily upon an extended use of flashbacks. These, invented largely by Visconti, show Aschenbach in debate with one of his pupils, as heavy-handed a means of conveying ideas as is likely to be found in a "major" film by an acclaimed director. Tedious dialogues between Aschenbach and "Alfred" punctuate the more visually alive scenes in Venice. They are abstract in the extreme and do little to illuminate either the character of Aschenbach, the dilemma of the artist, or the dilemma of the bourgeoisie, Mann's essential themes. One suspects that Visconti cares little for the ideas being bandied about and is really using the flashbacks to show that homosexual impulses were present in Aschenbach before his fatal voyage to Venice—an easy psychologism in which Mann did not feel it necessary to indulge.

Visconti's conception of Aschenbach deteriorates as the film progresses. In the first flashback his mouth quivers at the thought of there being so little time left for him to create beautiful works of art, a sentiment which falls

flat since we doubt whether he was ever capable of genuine creation. Flashing forward to his room at the Hotel des Bains we witness him kissing the photos of his little girl and wife. Visconti has Aschenbach's daughter die in childhood, so that Aschenbach's parched emotional life can be attributed to the harshness of fortune. Mann has Aschenbach's wife die, but his daughter grow up to maturity and marry, only to see and be seen by her father infrequently, in an emotionless relationship. Visconti seems to be trying to engage our sympathies by suggesting that if only Aschenbach's wife and daughter were with him, he would not have needed Tadzio, undermining the point that sexual repression corrupts and love denied finds expression in the illicit.

Visconti turns the boy into an outrageous flirt, something Mann only hinted at. But it is surely exaggerating to equate, as Visconti does in his editing, the boy with the prostitute from whom an adolescent Aschenbach fled in fear. Visconti has both the boy and the prostitute play on the piano Beethoven's "Für Elise." The music continues from one shot over the other in the distant past; conceptually linking boy and prostitute. Visconti loses Mann's sense that the boy, while he represented the temptation of sensual beauty, was not therefore himself a temptor.

The debate between Aschenbach and Alfred regarding the origin of beauty is too little integrated into the perceptions of Aschenbach's life, as sterile as they are, to link the conversation with the advent of Tadzio. Aschenbach had argued that beauty was the product of intellectual labor and the discipline of will, his pupil that it is born spontaneously from unrestrained senses. The viewer watches the frenzied scene between the two men with distant interest. Why are they so excited? What has this to do with the flight of Aschenbach to Venice? Aschenbach is told that his great error is to consider life, reality, a limitation. His retort is that reality degrades us: "You can't expect life to illuminate the targets and steady your arm." Despite Visconti's nudging, it could be argued that within this abstract context

both men are right. Great art is the result of self-denying discipline; its inspiration may indeed be the "spontaneous" beauty of a Tadzio.

But the film does not give life to these words by embodying the real experience for which they are meant to stand. Partly this is the result of Visconti's failure to offer Aschenbach any opportunity for self-knowledge: a recognition that his way of life has led to its opposite. Mann's Aschenbach learns that his emotional and sensual denial has led to a degrading descent into the filth and corruption of impulses which he himself had taught the bourgeoisie to disdain. Visconti's Aschenbach is mildly bemused by his lust, tortured, but utterly uncomprehending. And because we have not seen Aschenbach in his ordinary life, (which Mann showed us in the minutest detail), we cannot accept Visconti's Aschenbach as a person who has tried to make of his personal life a balance, an example of the wisdom and human dignity which he is supposed to have expressed in his music. We cannot see him as a man who failed because the principles for which he stood ran contrary to the real experience of his age.

Visconti throws in one scene of moral judgment at the end of the film, as Aschenbach is already suffocating from cholera. We see Aschenbach, having completed a concert, greeted by the hoots and howls of an enraged bourgeoisie. Visconti has the bourgeois audience inexplicably see Aschenbach as a sham, whereas Mann never granted Aschenbach's admirers so great a degree of self-perception. For why should those whose values Aschenbach never questioned suddenly challenge his art, unless they were all too uncharacteristically criticizing themselves as well? It may be that Visconti intended the scene as fantasy rather than as a flashback into the past. In this sense it would represent Aschenbach's fear before death that his life had been in vain, that his music with its call for a discipline that denies life its vitality and freedom would suffer oblivion as deep as his personal fall.

The film does contain at least one other fantasy which occurs as well in a flashback.

Visconti cuts from the image of Tadzio to Aschenbach's memory of the funeral of his daughter, he and his wife weeping, the coffin being carried away. As he remembers the death of his child, he fantasizes that of Tadzio.



The cutting is clever because it is a perfect visual expression of Mann's insight into Aschenbach's secret wish that Tadzio not live to grow up, so that his beloved would not outlive him. But the scene of the hooting bourgeoisie flashed back at the end of the film matches with the flashback at the beginning in which the doctor urged Aschenbach (presumably after this great failure) to try a change of scene. That Aschenbach failed in his art first and then in his personal morality seems consistent with Visconti's generally contemptuous attitude toward a character whom he grants no integrity whatsoever.

Visconti's film is most successful when he returns to his visualization of the bourgeoisie. (Visconti only intermittently recognizes this class to be unworthy of an artist's concern about its capacity for dignity and wisdom. Mann never wavered in this conviction.) While the shots in the lobby of the Hotel des Bains showed this bourgeoisie in all its superficial beauty and invulnerability, on the beach they are shown uncovered, lewd, vulgar, disgusting. Old women wrapped in turbans in the fashion of the day laugh and the fat shakes on their faces. The children are chubby and awkward. The camera focuses on the bald head of a

man. The medley of voices murmuring in foreign languages (a technique Visconti used skillfully in the courtroom scene of *The Stranger*) effectively conveys the mindlessness of the bourgeoisie talking but saying nothing.

The calm image of Aschenbach by the surf watching Tazio appears then as a spiritual relief, although the danger inherent in his infatuation for the boy is nowhere better dramatized than in the following scene in which he is caught in the elevator with Tazio and his friends who seem to be laughing at him in mockery. It is at this point that Aschenbach packs his trunk to leave. But the subsequent flashback once again to the all-knowing Alfred accusing him of not living seems almost to suggest than an acceptance of life and the senses would demand that Aschenbach *remain* in Venice. Yet the extremity of Aschenbach's obsession with the boy has made it all too plain that only disaster awaits him. "Contact with reality" is too trite an expression of Aschenbach's needs at the moment. That "art is indifferent to morality," another of Alfred's arguments, is a gross simplification of Mann's insights: "And has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once: moral in so far as it is the expression and result of discipline, immoral—yes, actually hostile to morality—in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided sceptre?"

Mann felt in fact that one of the greatest dangers to art is that the artist not be attuned enough to the moral needs of the world from which the nature of his profession separates him. The challenge Visconti shirked was to translate this notion into cinema, to locate it in the texture of Aschenbach's life as an artist. By showing him to us only as a dirty old man, his flight to Venice loses its resonance. Gone as well is Mann's criticism of the bourgeois way of life which was at the root of Aschenbach's stultification as a human being. For it is one thing to show the bourgeoisie as physically distasteful and another to challenge its claim to moral precedence.

Only at rare moments does Visconti deepen his criticism of the bourgeois. Sitting petulantly in the railroad station, refusing to leave Venice until his trunk is returned, Aschenbach first looks toward, then loses his nerve and looks away from the poor and shabby man who falls in a seizure from the cholera—our first hint of the plague. Aschenbach's self-absorption is equated with the pestilence engulfing the city. Just as neither Aschenbach nor any of the other tourists lend a hand to the pale man in brown rumpled hat who sinks to the floor, so will none of them grasp the essential immorality of their class.

But the triumphant music accompanying Aschenbach's return to Venice, the blue water splashing around him, has too much of Visconti's sympathy to be as ironic as it should. Visconti in truth cannot decide whether Aschenbach's desire for the boy is a liberation or a degradation; perhaps this is why his death at the end is so stilted and unreal and endlessly, operatically long. The sunsets in their rainbow-painted splendor are only half ironic as they half mourn the fall of greatness in Aschenbach. These images negate the searing criticism of the idle bourgeoisie which Visconti achieved earlier with his camera. They further isolate Aschenbach from this milieu as if he were different, separate, more valuable, whereas in truth he is the epitome of the dying class gathered in Venice. (As a visualization of this corruption, a pestilence simultaneously symbolic and real, one of the best bits in the film is the vignette in which a demonic troubador and his troupe play at the Hotel, now abandoned by most of its guests. The troubador makes obscene gestures to the guests, an appropriate metaphor for Aschenbach's inner state. The finale is a song of hysterical, absurd laughter in which the players mock themselves, the guests, and life itself. It is ironically this devil figure whom Aschenbach asks whether there is a pestilence in Venice. He does not want to know the truth, just as he has failed to accept the truth about himself and the inadequacy of his belief that man can combat the irrational and the assaults to his

dignity, not by a transvaluation of values, but by will alone.)

Once he learns the truth about the cholera from a clerk at Cook's Visconti brilliantly has Aschenbach imagine his warning the Polish woman to leave Venice with her children, only to be rewarded by touching the boy's head (as Rohmer rewards Jerome with a caress of Claire's knee). He imagines the scene, he knows that to be moral he must attempt to save their lives, yet he cannot. As Mann says in *The Magic Mountain*, sensual desire may be repressed, but it will not disappear: "Love thus suppressed was not dead; it lived, it laboured after fulfillment in the darkest and secretest depths of the being. It would break through the ban of chastity, it would emerge—if in a form so altered as to be unrecognizable." Tortured by his failure to do the right thing, Aschenbach weeps, but he falls. Shortly he will visit the barbershop to be returned to his youth with black dye and carmine rouge, the music of Mahler heralding the depths of his degradation.



The last scenes are faithful to Mann's story. Aschenbach follows the Polish children and their governess through Venice. The streets are lit with bonfires and filled with lumpen elements who have emerged as symptoms of the corruption of the city. Prison bars shadow the circulars posted on buildings warning against the contamination; they symbolize Aschenbach's imprisonment in his lust. His

lip rouge smears. Feverishly, he sits down amidst the rubbish. Melodramatically, he both laughs and cries in his hysteria, crying in shame, laughing in irony at what he has become. He hears the now mocking words of Alfred: "You have achieved perfect balance. The man and the artist are one. They have reached bottom together." The words somehow are too strong, too unsympathetic to Aschenbach's plight, too much a victory in debate rather than, as in Mann, the mourning of a past order.

The final images reiterate the film's motifs, a technique Mann used in the story as well. An aging bourgeoisie sings a requiem for herself, for Venice, for her dying class. The wide expanse of beach with only a few figures small and isolated conveys a visual sense of a wider world existing, within which the visitors to the Hotel des Bains are small and insignificant. Tadzio and his friend wrestle in a parody of lovemaking and Aschenbach tries to rise from his chair as if he would join them. Tadzio walks toward the sparkling water, a vision of the beauty Aschenbach has denied, an image rather than the reality of a boy, as the antique camera placed expressionistically in the foreground of the shot reminds us.

Tadzio wades into the water as Aschenbach crosses over into death. The boy turns, like art or beauty, indifferent to the suffering of the tormented artist. A boat on the horizon recalls the first image of the film, the steamer on which Aschenbach began his fatal journey. The boy points off in the distance, Aschenbach tries to reach out and then falls back only to be observed in long shot being carried off the beach like a sack of wheat. The man who called in Mann's story for a repudiation of the abyss ends ignominiously, rather than tragically, because Visconti has not sufficiently drawn Aschenbach as the best example of bourgeois man whose demise, in Mann's story, was mourned by a "shocked and respectful world."

The flamboyant Visconti is, at his best, the master of the bold stroke and the garish melodramatic gesture. Too often these fail as equiv-

alents of more subtle emotions, as for example when Visconti would have us equate Nazism with raving sadomasochistic homosexuality. Such an artist could find little appeal in the ambiguous character of Mann's Gustav von Aschenbach. For his discipline, rigor and precision, which Mann both admired and held suspect, Visconti has only scorn.

And even Visconti's magnificently mounted depiction of the haute bourgeoisie buttering its croissants and ordering fine wines on the Lido has about it an ambiguity, as if Visconti himself could conceive of no way of life as graceful. This is why the pale elegance of Silvana Mangano runs as a thread through all the scenes supposedly satirizing the bourgeoisie. Her beauty is there to remind us that the bourgeoisie is, despite its self-indulgence, also the highest degree of civilization yet to appear.

While Mann recognized the high degree of achievement of the bourgeoisie, its steadfastness and devotion to duty as valuable assets, he was unrelenting in his opposition to its essential amorality. His Aschenbach destroys himself because, despite his concern for the rules, he lacks a positive core of values by which to define both individual and society. For Mann, Aschenbach's surrender to sensuality is at once too late and a result, not of the chosen life, but of life revenging itself on a culture which has diminished it.

Visconti seems at times to be as severe a critic of the bourgeoisie, yet he cannot relinquish his appreciation for the superficialities of its achievement, for the veneer of style which, he also fails to see, serves primarily as a cover for an inherent absence of moral principle. Instead, Visconti offers a world whose sensuality and demand for every physical lust militate against its immorality. He chastises the artist for his abstinence amidst these delights, for ordering only soup and fish for dinner. Indian patterned cloths, huge plates of ripe fruit, including Mann's noxious strawberries, are equated by the camera with the greatest joys life has to offer. Tadzio too becomes one of life's splendors and Aschenbach's infatuation absolved. And Tadzio is idealized by the cam-

era with soft focus in the corner of a shot or the blur of a white umbrella in the foreground rendering his figure in deep focus like a Greek statue unobstructed by the gratuitous details of a world to which his beauty makes him superior.

Nor can Visconti, paradoxically, perceive the strength of the bourgeois era, and therefore the tragic significance of Aschenbach's fall. The images of his film tend to be ungrounded in a central understanding of who Aschenbach was and how his defeat was a historical as well as a personal event. The black smoke of the steamer carrying Aschenbach to Venice, the twilight with which Venice is bathed on Aschenbach's arrival, the boys in uniform running by the landing, the policemen who extort his tip from the old porter, the little boy in his cap passing Aschenbach as he arrives, the waltzes of a bygone age played by the band in the lobby—all, potentially significant, become disparate images, unconnected with the social origins and values of the central figure. Mann could give tribute to the bourgeois period while remaining implacable in wishing a dying order its overdue demise. Visconti, half-admiring the façade, never notices the substance—the tragedy of a man who could devote his life to proving himself and his class worthy of an unchallengeable social and moral status.

Meanwhile the slouching walk of a diffident Aschenbach, his shoulders hunched over, is pathetic, a senseless denier of life's feasts. Where Mann showed the moral inadequacy of the bourgeois *Weltanschauung* in Aschenbach's decline, Visconti applauds the trip to Venice, as if even the sight of the boy alone were enough to restore Aschenbach to the living. The conflict Aschenbach undergoes in the process is interpreted by Visconti simplistically as his failure to transcend remaining vestiges of puritanism. Confused and painfully callow, Visconti's adaptation of *Death in Venice* should remind us, not of the impossibility of adapting great literature to film, but of the danger to the film-maker who would translate into his medium the work of an artist whose ideas he has not mastered as his own.—JOAN MELLEN